"That's the best answer I've got, Bones. Nadia wasn't looking for something permanent--T'serek is. By the looks of him he's got a career of his own ahead of him. It wouldn't be good for him. I've had a yen before. I'll live through it."

"Have you talked to him?"

Kirk skirted that memory of the boy standing alone in the wrecked room. "About what? He must know the facts of life by now. There's nothing else to say. He hasn't put a foot wrong. Two commendations in his first six weeks aboard. Competence is what I strive for on this ship. Am I supposed to tell him not to be so good he makes other people jealous? You can't turn it off, Bones, not and have anything left worth having."

"Are we talking about Dray T'serek or James Kirk?"

"Either, both, anybody with something extra. Use it or lose it. I won't talk to him, but I'll do something better. When the Fleet gets around to ordering us in, I'll send him on the Ixmahx mission with Spock."

McCoy frowned and swirled the brandy around in his glass.

"I don't doubt Dray would be pleased, but would Spock?"

"Mr. Spock has distinguished himself among my staff by leaving me uninformed as to his likes and dislikes with regard to my orders."

"That's nothing but Vulcan repression, Jim. I wouldn't be surprised if T'serek scares him spitless."

"Spock? Why?"

"Spock's not asexual, Jim, even if he has got an odd sense of timing. And T'serek exudes sexuality. The combination gives me a bad feeling."

"You can't have it both ways, Bones. T'serek deserves his chance, and if anyone can observe military decorum, it's Spock."

McCoy finished his drink, shelved his doubts.

"Oh, I didn't think Dray would get out of hand. I think I'll fold and deal myself a new set of worries tomorrow. G'nite, Jim."

Kirk showered and hit his bunk, wishing he found it that easy. He'd bounced the idea of sending T'serek with Spock right off the top of his head. It was the kind of recognition Dray would value most. And Spock might be only a spectator, but he was an astute observer and Kirk doubted there were many human problems the Vulcan couldn't sympathize with behind his mask. Kirk kicked the sheets back

And what's the worst that could happen, he asked himself. What if Dray fell head over heels in love with Spock? There was no law against it, no reason it had to interfere with duty hours; the boy had meant what he'd said. Perhaps total commitment would put an end to his unconscious draw and effectively answer the Nicholsons--and admit it, the Kirks--of this world. Spock could defend himself.

And if he doesn't want to? prompted a small inner voice. Well, Spock had a right to love, too. The camraderie of duty hours would be altered a little, but that was a reasonable price to pay for Spock's life. The pon farr question had never really been settled. If Spock and Dray bonded--it would be all to the good, wouldn't it? Meet both their needs?

And yours? asked the voice.

I have my ship, he answered it, and anyway this is a decompression dream. Nothing's happened yet.

And ignoring the habitual vague ache of loneliness and the more recent desire to purge it in the physical perfection of Dray T'serek, James Kirk slept.

When the expected message came from Starfleet, it wasn't Admiral Nogura's face, but Meade Morrow's that filled the monitor. The pan-anthropologist's gray hair was pushed awry off her broad forehead, and she looked older than at their last meeting. She was one of the few non-military advisors who could command the narrow beam and high energy drain it took to boost a message through hyperspace.

"Jim, it's good to see you. How's the Enterprise?"

"Fit and ready for action, Meade. Can you say the same for the Admiralty?"

"Some days I wonder. I thought I had some of these desk-pushers pursuaded to let you take a hand in this Ixmahx affair, Jim, but Nogura will be getting through to you shortly with orders to divert back to V'ei'drei for some diplomatic juggling there. In the meantime, and if I have gotten in ahead of him, my authorization to have you look at Ixmahx hasn't been cancelled to my knowledge. I wouldn't make it an order, but I'd like to know why the Romulans are so interested in that world."

"We haven't received anything else from Starfleet, Captain," said Uhura.

"What can we do for you, Meade?"

"I'm not exactly sure. Artificial cultures give me the willies, Jim, and it's pretty clear the Ixmahx worlds were set up as some kind of operations base. They've resisted change for an awfully long time. Now possibly the race than engineered that is dead and gone--but they might not be. All the talk about superweapons makes one wonder. If you could send a shuttle down and talk to the VIPs in person--or Spock, if Nogura needs you at V'ei'drei--you might give us a clearer picture."

Kirk nodded. Meade was not given to unwarranted paranoia. He'd backed her hunches before and found them sound. Her request fit in with his plans for Spock and Dray, anyway.

"What are my men likely to run into down there?"

"I'll zipsqueal you all we've got--about thirty seconds realtime."

"All right, Meade. We've been having a little communications difficulty and there's a possibility we might lose your signal in a moment. It will take us about an hour before we can repair things here. By that time we can have it set up. Go ahead."